

Officials to try whitewater releases again



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A plan that called for nearly two dozen whitewater releases from the F.E. Walter Dam near White Haven last year evaporated under the heat and sunshine of late summer.

But the plan worked well enough for officials to try again this spring and summer.

The late-summer drought forced the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, which operates the dam on the Lehigh River, from carrying through on its planned 22 whitewater releases.

That's because the lack of precipitation often left the dam's water level below that needed for the releases.

Details of this year's management plan will be unveiled when the Corps of Engineers holds a public workshop at 6:30 p.m. Feb. 16 at Split Rock Lodge in Lake Harmony.

"The goal, from [the Wildlands Conservancy's] perspective is to make sure that organizations with an interest in the Lehigh [can have] their voices heard," said Chris Kocher of the Lehigh County-based conservation group that's part of the consortium of agencies sponsoring the workshop.

"Much like last year, we are going to facilitate a public forum to gain input," Kocher said.

But even after the workshop, the public will get a chance to comment on the 2006 dam management plan through a Web site set up for that purpose, Kocher noted.

Joining the federal agency and conservancy representatives will be officials of the state Fish and Boat Commission, state Department of Natural Resources and Delaware River Basin Commission.

In 2005, the corps, after developing its whitewater plan in conjunction with the other organizations, stepped up releases to improve rafting, kayaking and boating conditions while also seeking to improve downstream habitat for fish and other wildlife.

The Corps of Engineers planned 15 more releases of 750 cubic feet of water per second than it accomplished in 2004.

And the Pocono Mountain Vacation Bureau and Carbon County officials trumpeted that plan as important for the local economy.

The additional releases were made possible when a new road over the top of the dam was completed, letting operators fill the reservoir to a higher level and increasing by three times the number of whitewater releases.

As the summer progressed, Corps of Engineers officials canceled the last five whitewater releases, between late May and Oct. 2.

Since the 2005 management plan was unveiled, the Corps of Engineers has gotten feedback from 375 members of the public interested in the state of the river.

The Lehigh downstream of the dam is considered a high quality coldwater fishery and the Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance wants Congress to fund a study determining how the dam should be operated to ensure a year-round trout fishery below the dam.

"It should be a really interesting evening to hear the plan officially, and hopefully to get some public comment," Kocher said.

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